

EXPERIMENTAL STUDY OF ARCING ON HIGH-VOLTAGE SOLAR ARRAYS

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1. Introduction

The main obstacle to the implementation of a high-voltage solar array in space is arcing on the conductor-dielectric junctions exposed to the surrounding plasma. One obvious solution to this problem would be the installation of fully encapsulated solar arrays which were not having exposed conductors at all. However, there are many technological difficulties that must be overcome before the employment of fully encapsulated arrays will turn into reality. An alternative solution to raise arc threshold by modifications of conventionally designed solar arrays looks more appealing, at least in the nearest future. A comprehensive study of arc inception mechanism [1-4] suggests that such modifications can be done in the following directions: i) to insulate conductor-dielectric junction from a plasma environment (wrapthrough interconnects); ii) to change a coverglass geometry (overhang); iii) to increase a coverglass thickness; iiil) to outgas areas of conductor-dielectric junctions. The operation of high-voltage array in LEO produces also the parasitic current power drain on the electrical system. Moreover, the current collected from space plasma by solar arrays determines the spacecraft floating potential that is very important for the design of spacecraft and its scientific apparatus. In order to verify the validity of suggested modifications and to measure current collection five different solar array samples have been tested in large vacuum chamber. Each sample (36 silicon based cells) consists of three strings containing 12 cells connected in series. Thus, arc rate and current collection can be measured on every string independently, or on a whole sample when strings are connected in parallel. The heater installed in the chamber provides the possibility to test samples under temperature as high as 80 C that simulates the LEO operational temperature. The experimental setup is described below.

2. Experimental setup

Low Earth Orbit (LEO) plasma environment was simulated in two different vacuum vessels: 1) horizontal vacuum chamber (1.8 m diameter and 2.5 m long) equipped with cryogenic pump; 2) large vacuum tank (1.8 m diameter and 3 m height) with four diffusion pumps. The vacuum equipment provided pressure as low as 0.5 μ Torr. The essential difference between these two tanks is that the residual water vapor partial pressure in horizontal chamber is five times lower than in vertical tank. Each vessel has one Kaufman plasma source that generates xenon (or argon) plasma with electron density $n_e=(0.1-10)\cdot 10^5\text{ cm}^{-3}$, temperature $T_e=0.6-1.2\text{ eV}$, and neutral gas pressure $p=(0.7-7)\cdot 10^{-5}\text{ Torr}$ which can be kept steady during the experiment. To measure plasma parameters, Langmuir probes with diameter 2 cm were employed (two in each tank). To determine an ion distribution function and to improve measurements of electron temperature one retarding potential analyzer (RPA) was mounted on the bottom of vertical tank. It was found that the ion (xenon) thermal flux in the experiment is about three times lower than ram ion flux in LEO, and the electron temperature is 5-10 times higher than in ionosphere. However, the number densities are simulated with a quite high accuracy, and one can believe that the results of high-voltage

experiments in vacuum chambers are fairly adequate to the outcomes of processes in LEO plasma. To control plasma chemical composition (particularly, water vapor and oil partial pressures) a quadrupole mass spectrometer was installed in each tank.

The sample (or set of samples) is vertically mounted in the middle of the chamber, and it is biased to a voltage power supply through a capacitor and a 10 k Ω resistor network back to ground. An additional power supply (Solar Array Simulator-SAS) is used to generate electrical field perpendicular to the dielectric side surface for investigating arc inception on semiconductor-dielectric junction and inception of sustained discharges between adjacent strings. Diagnostic equipment includes two current probes to measure discharge current and SAS current, and one voltage probe that allows us to register voltage pulse on the sample during the discharge (Fig.1). To measure optical spectra of arc plasma an intensified CCD (1024x512 pixel) camera with optical spectrometer is installed (Fig.2). The arc sites are determined by employing a video camera and VCR. Most experiments were performed at room temperature (15C), but some tests had been done at the temperature +80 C simulating the exposure of solar array to full sun in LEO.

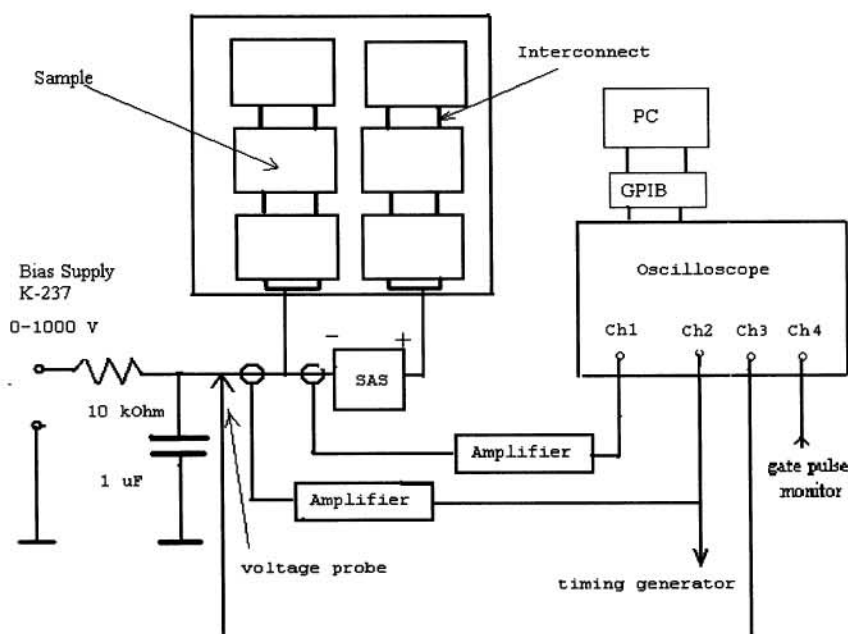


Fig.1. Circuitry diagram for arc inception study.

3. Arc spectra

Previous experimental data and theoretical analysis have demonstrated that water molecules absorbed on the side surface of dielectric (coverglass+adhesive) can play a decisive role in the process of arc inception [5-7]. It is known that spectra of vacuum arcs consist of cathode metal lines only⁸ but adding air in vacuum chamber (10^{-4} Torr) results in appearance of hydrogen and hydroxyl lines⁹. Partial pressure of water vapor and nitrogen is always below 10^{-5} Torr for the current experiment. Thus, the presence of hydrogen and hydroxyl in the arc plasma would be a good indicator of water ions dissociative recombination. The presence of other species in arc plasma may reveal other important processes in the discharge development. To elucidate all

these problems the measurements of optical spectra have been performed for silicon solar array sample (Fig.3). All dielectric-conductor junctions besides one interconnect area were insulated by tape to exclude spectra from arcs between cells. The spectral resolution was determined as 0.12 nm/pixel by using standard calibration lamps. To increase the arc luminosity an additional

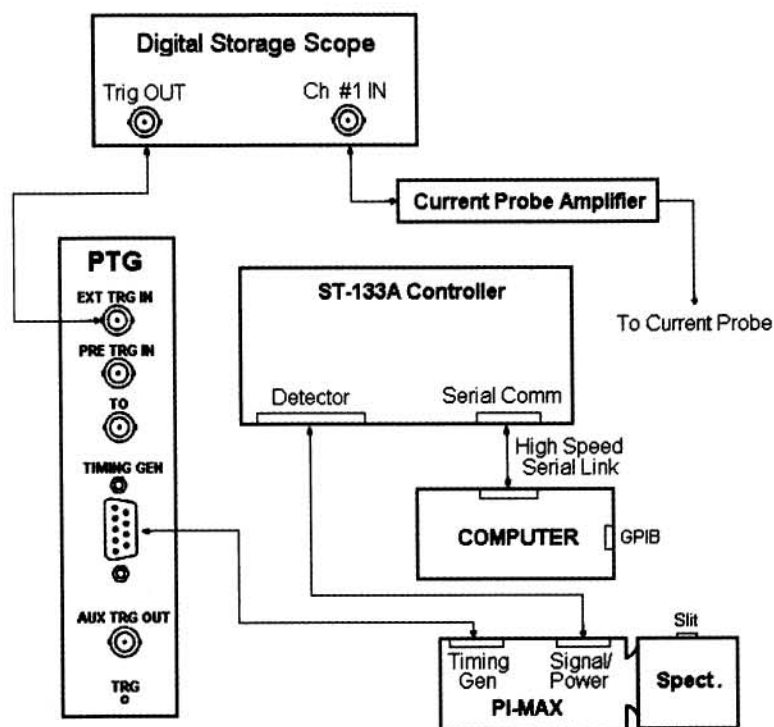


Fig.2. Setup of optical spectra measurements.

capacitor (usually 1 μF) was installed between negatively biased electrode and ground. Gate pulse generator (Fig.2) provided varying both gate pulse width and time delay; thus, it was possible to measure the intensities of spectral lines on different stages of a discharge development. One example of the time sequence of discharge current pulse and gate pulse is shown in Fig.4. In addition to hydrogen (H_{α}), hydroxyl (OH), and metal lines (Ag) arcing on the sample revealed also some molecular radicals identified according to Ref. 8 (Fig.5).

The results of spectral measurements, observation of decreasing arc rate with number of arcs (conditioning), and theoretical estimates [9] are very strong argument in favor of the idea that in order to raise arc threshold solar array surfaces must be thoroughly outgassed. The validity of this hypothesis has been confirmed by ground tests described in Sec. 5 below.

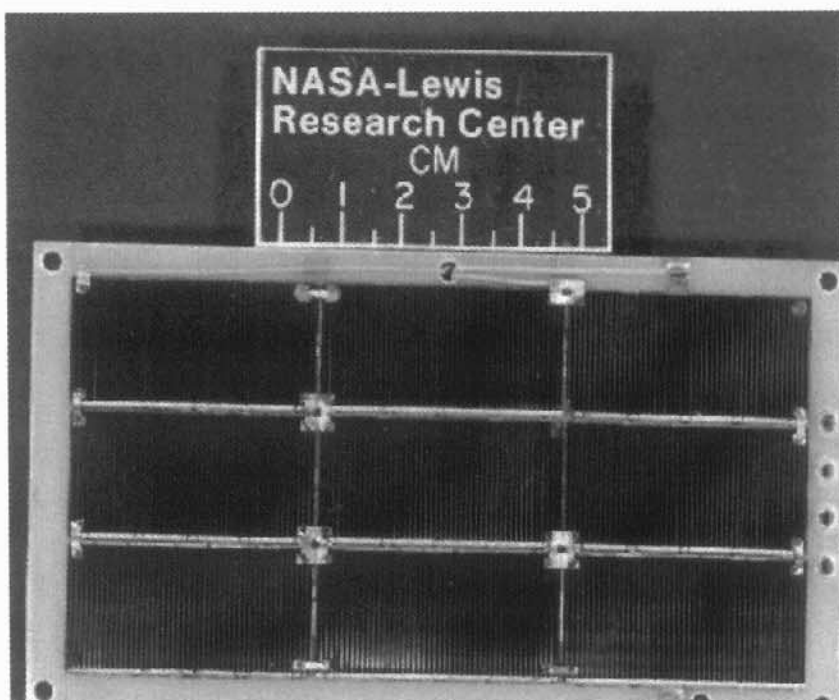


Fig.3. Silicon solar array sample used for measurements of arc spectra.

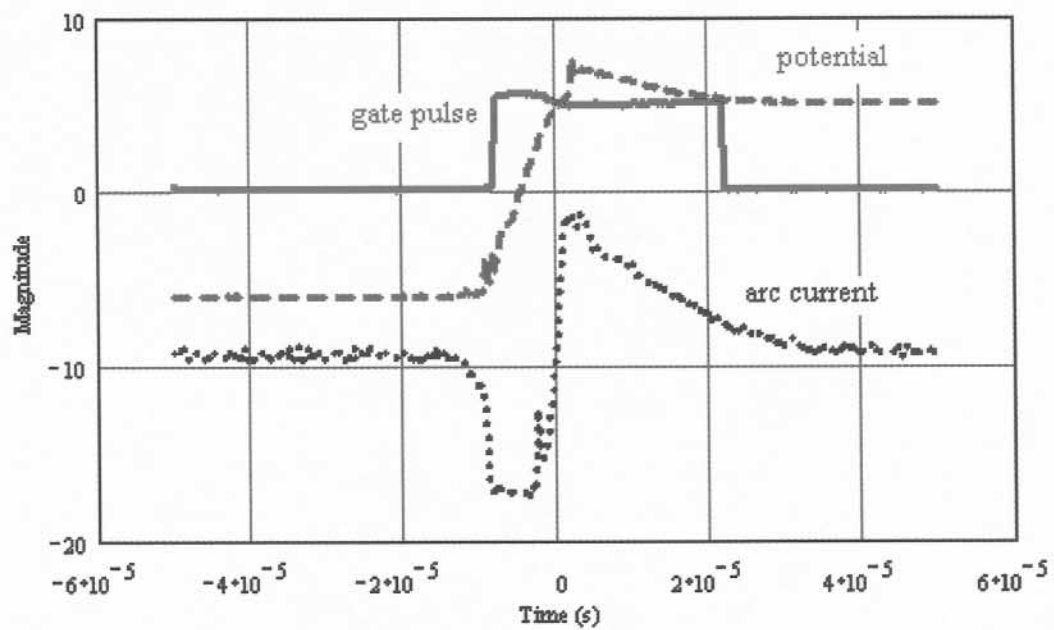
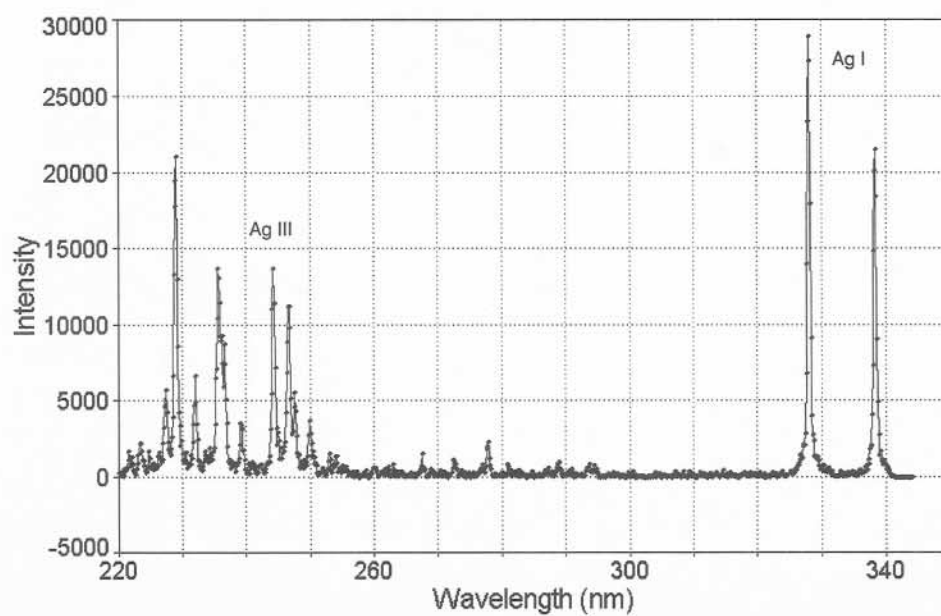
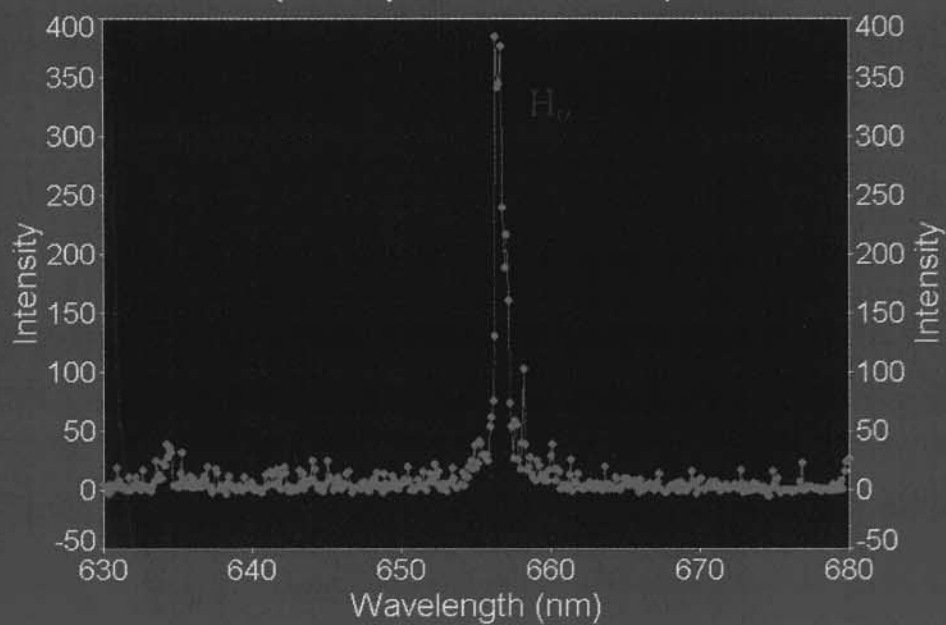


Fig.4. One example of pulses time sequence applied for spectral measurements.

Arc spectrum (Ag lines)



Sample
($C=1\ \mu\text{F}$; $U=-250\ \text{V}$)



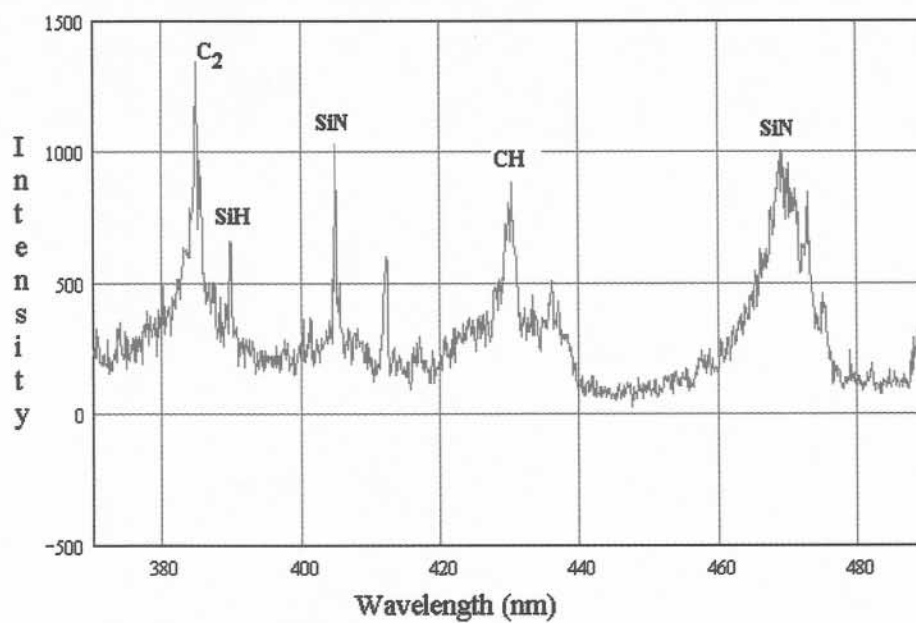
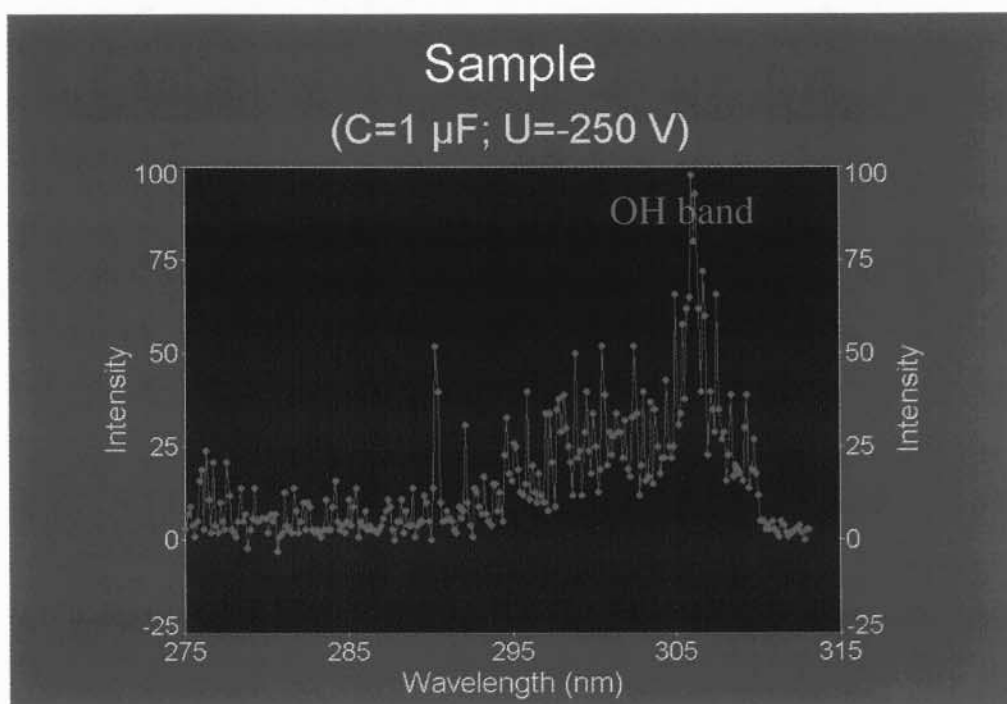


Fig.5. One example of emission spectrum of arc plasma.

4. Contamination of plasma environment

When spacecraft is coming out of eclipse, solar array temperature is rising due to exposure to Sun radiation. Operational temperature of an array in LEO conditions is approximately 80-100 C. It is believed that the adsorbed contaminants from the array surface are evaporating at a high rate due to heating. On another hand, when solar array sample is installed in a vacuum chamber its surface is contaminated not only by "natural" species (adsorbed water, atmospheric gases, and products of a technological process) but also other contaminants. The most abundant of these contaminants is vacuum pump oil. To measure chemical composition of background vacuum and to determine plasma contamination due to heating, the quadruple mass-spectrometer is installed in large chamber. Two solar array samples consisting of 36 cells (4x6 cm) each are mounted on an aluminum sheet with electrical heater placed on the back (Fig.6). This heater provides enough power to radiately heat sample from 15 C to 80 C for about 50 minutes (Fig.7). It is seen that the increase in water vapor partial pressure is considerably higher than the plain isochoric increase

$\frac{\Delta p}{p_0} = \frac{\Delta T}{T_0}$, and this observation confirms the presence of water absorbed on solar array surface.

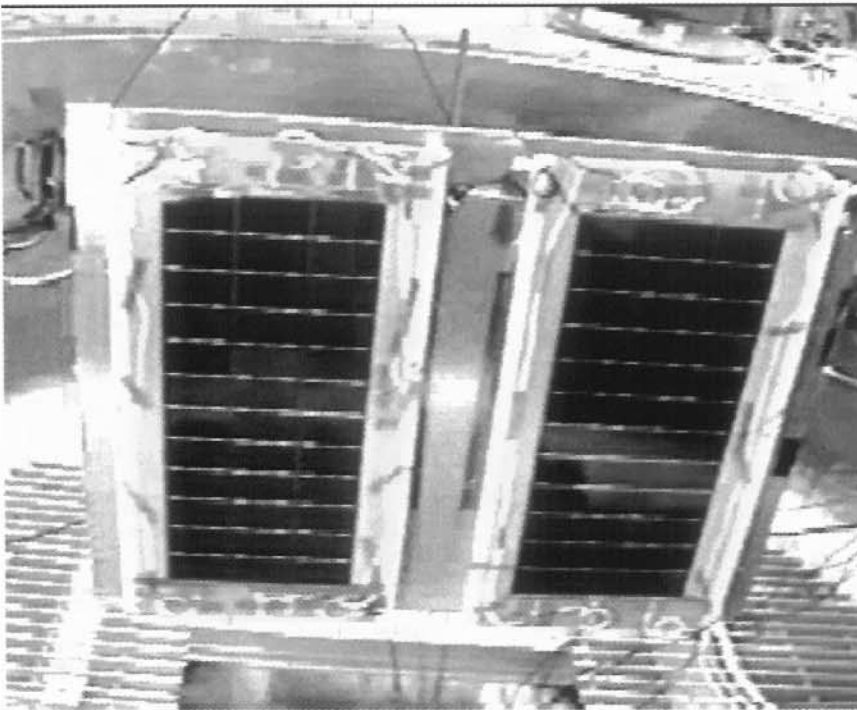


Fig.6. Solar array samples installed in vacuum chamber.

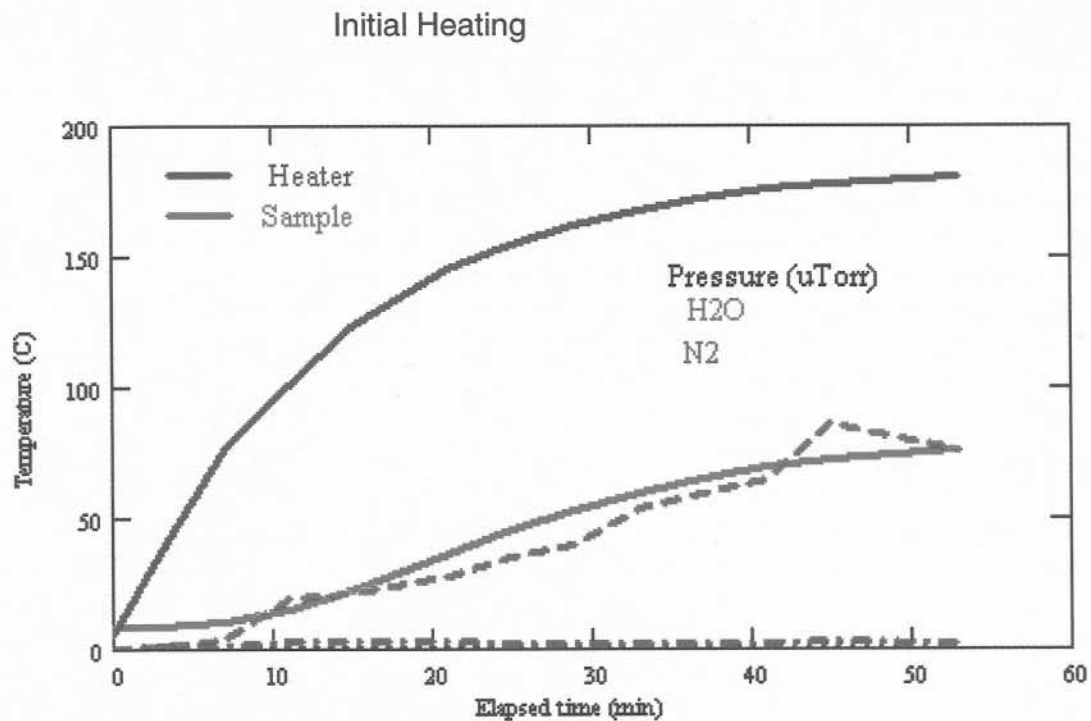


Fig.7. Increase of water vapor pressure is considerably higher than plain isochoric increase.

Five cycles of heating-cooling sample in vacuum chamber resulted in significant drop of residual water vapor pressure (Fig.8).

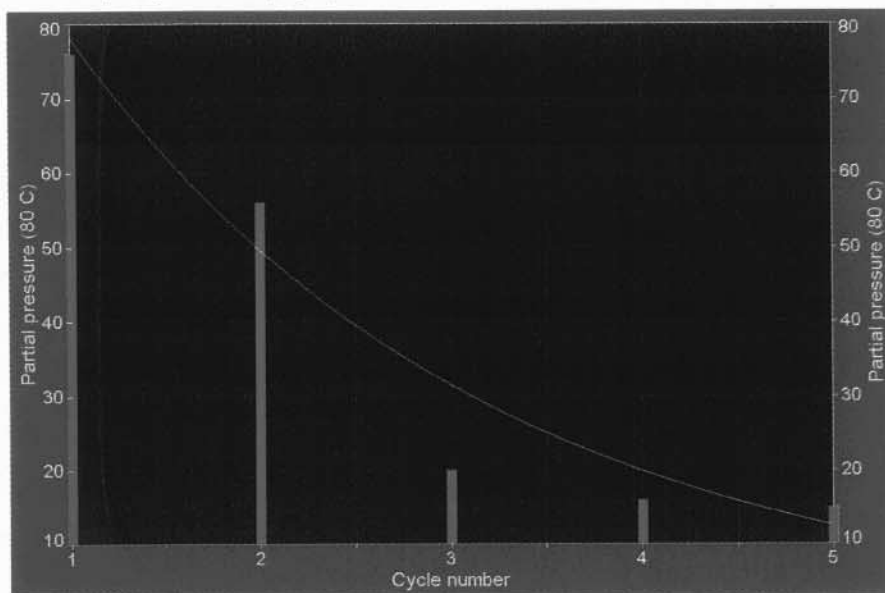


Fig.8. Water vapor partial pressure in course of thermal cycling (rel. units).

5. Arcing in plasma

Five types of tested solar arrays are shown in Table 1. Each string (12 cells in series) is tested separately to measure arc inception voltage and arc rate. Measurements reveal significant differences in these parameters even for strings belonging to one sample. There are two reasons explaining such observations: manufacturing process peculiarities and geometrical design of a sample. In fact, the middle string is separated from neighboring strings by narrow gaps (0.8 mm) covered with a thin RTV layer while two other strings have edges with underlying semiconductor and dielectric exposed to the plasma. Manufacturing peculiarities demonstrate themselves when one compares arc parameters for two outer strings and finds considerable differences. And arc sites are located mostly on interconnects for middle string while great part of arcs on outer strings has been observed on cell edges. To preserve the homogeneity of collected data one common experimental procedure is used for all measurements of arc inception voltages and arc rates: 1) string is initially biased to voltage well below an expected arcing threshold; 2) 15-30 minute time interval is allowed to register (or to not register) an arc; 3) voltage is increased on 10-20 V; 4) arc rate is defined as an average over a respective time span.

Table1. Five types of solar array samples tested in the large chambers.

Sample: No	Coverglass : Thickness (μm):	Material :	Overhang : (μm) :	Cell size : (cm) :	Interconnect
1	300	UVR	0	4x6	exposed
2	150	UVR	0	4x6	exposed
3	150	CMX UVR	0	4x6	exposed
4	150	UVR	250	4x6	exposed
5	150	UVR	0	8x8	wrapthrough

On the first stage of the test, two samples (#1 and #2 in Table 1) are mounted on the heater plate and installed in chamber. The results of measurements for middle strings at the room temperature are shown in Fig.9. Obviously, arc inception voltage is lower for the panel with thinner coverglass, and arc rates differ significantly. Arc rates have been also determined at high temperature (Fig.10). Arc rates are widely scattered over a range of voltages 280-380 V. In general, the temperature rise to 80 C results in significant increase of arc inception voltage (40-60 V). In particular, inner strings are not arcing below 300 V. It is worth noting that measurements shown above have been done at comparatively high water vapor partial pressures: 4 μTorr at 15 and 15-30 μTorr at 80 C. These values are much higher than one can anticipate in LEO conditions.

The decrease of an arc rate during the process of continuing arcing (conditioning) has been measured by biasing the whole sample #2 to -400 V and measuring average arc rate for every four minutes. Additional capacitance is increased from 0.22 μF to 1 μF to accelerate conditioning. After about 70 arcs, arc rate drops from 3.25 arc/min to the magnitude of 1 arc/min and stays practically steady for the next 30 arcs. To verify the influence of plasma density on arc rate this parameter has been increased by factor 1.5, and arc rate was measured for the next 100 arcs. Finally, arc rate has decreased to 0.25 arc/min after about 200 arcs. Thus, the influence of conditioning on previous measurements of arc rates for separate strings belonging to different samples is insignificant, particularly because of low capacitance (0.22 μF) used in these tests.

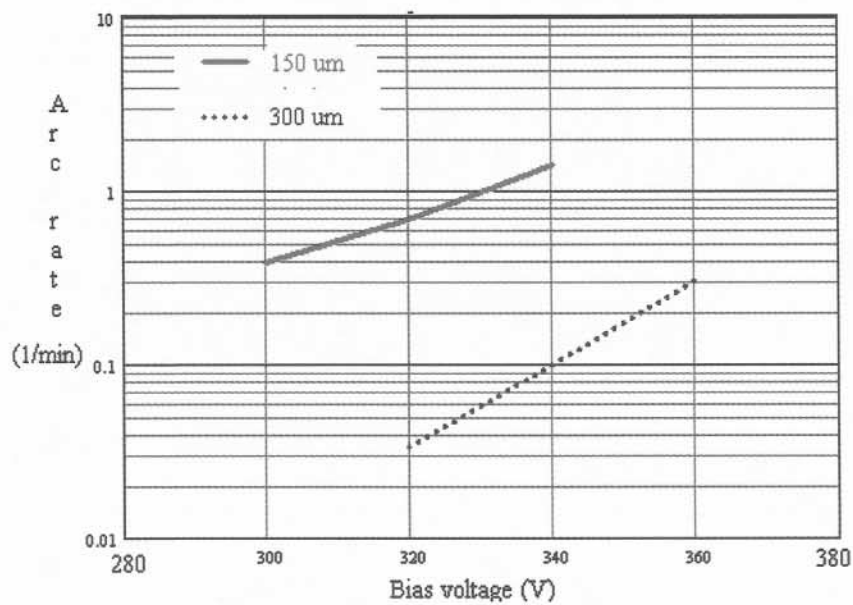


Fig.9. Arc rate on the middle strings (samples #1 and #2).

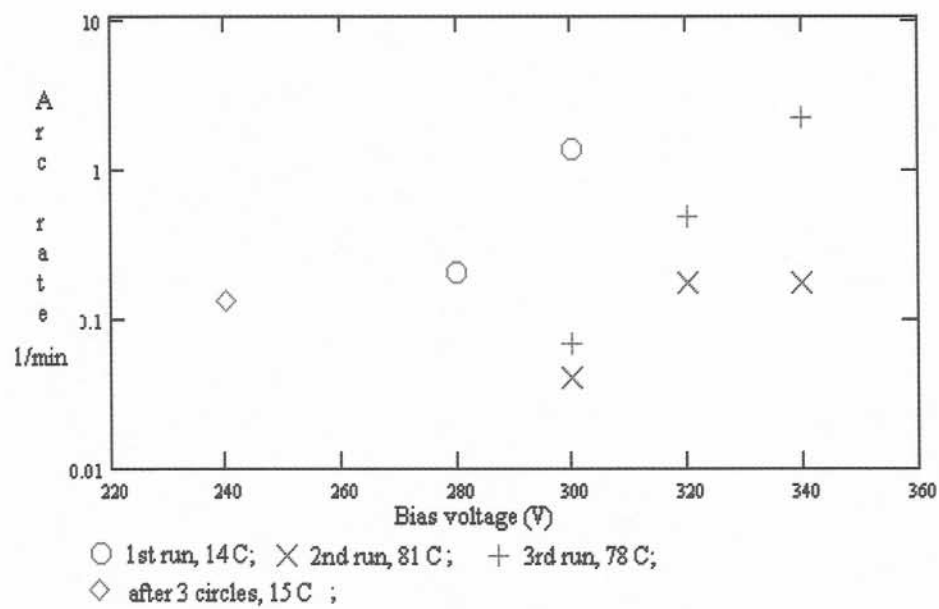


Fig.10. Arc rate on the middle string of sample #2.

To test the possibility of outgassing of the whole sample by heating it to 80 C and pumping out an excess of water vapor the sample #2 has been undergone to five thermal cycles (see Fig.8). Arc rates are measured for all three strings connected in parallel at room temperature before the first cycle and after the fifth cycle. The results are shown in Fig.11.

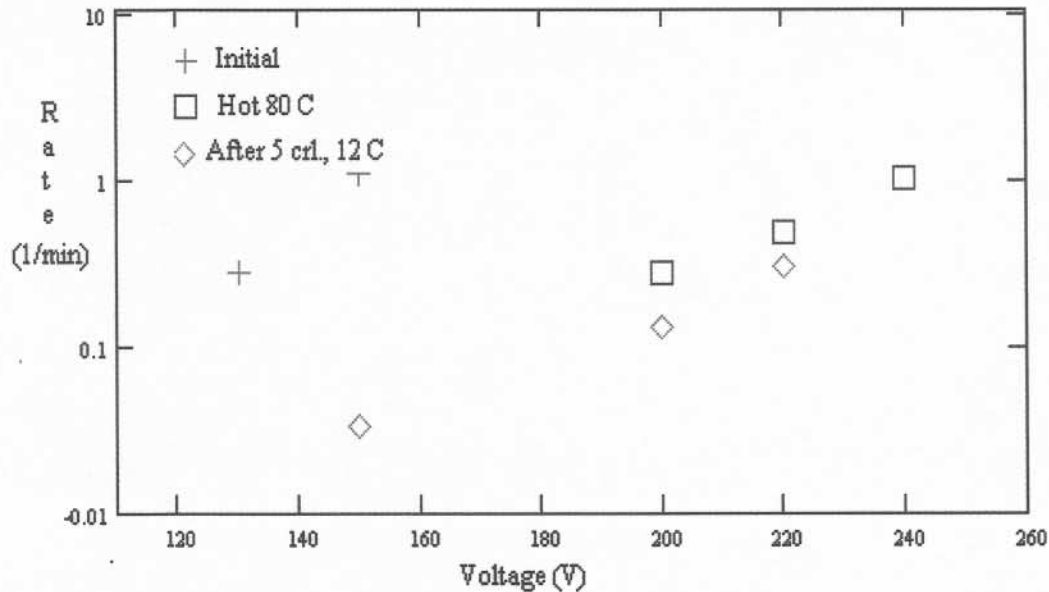


Fig.11. Arc rate on sample #2 (three strings in parallel).

It is seen in Fig.11 that arc rate decreases about 30 times and arc threshold increases approximately 30 V due to outgassing. It should be noted that minimum partial pressure of water vapor in xenon plasma reached in these experiments was 1.4 μ Torr that seems not low enough to outgas sample surfaces to the degree expected in LEO.

Arcing on the sample #3 (CMX UVR coverglass) does not show any measurable differences comparatively to arcing on sample #2. Arc inception voltage for the middle string is 300 V, and two other strings are arcing at lower voltages due to considerable percentage of arcs on the cell edges. On the contrary, the test results for the sample #4 (250 μ m overhang) look much more prospective. Arc inception voltage is 80-100 V higher, and arc rate is lower for the middle string. Two other strings have also demonstrated the decrease of arc rate in spite of arcing on cell edges. The increase of arc inception voltage to 480 V for the hot sample is particularly important. It seems that the array with coverglass overhang and additional insulation of cell edges can operate at 400 V in LEO conditions.

According to existing model of arc inception [10,11] the most probable arc site on an array surface is a conductor-dielectric junction exposed to the plasma. Thus, if all interconnects are insulated from the surrounding plasma the probability of a discharge decreases significantly. One of the possible realizations of this idea is the array design with wrapthrough interconnects (sample #5). Such design cannot prevent arcing at very high negative potential because edge of semiconductor (silicon, germanium, or other) stays exposed to the plasma, and many tests (including ones described in this paper) have demonstrated intensive arcing on cell edges. However, considerable increase of arc inception voltage can be expected, particularly for the middle string. Test results confirm these expectations (Fig.12). The inception of arc is observed on the middle string at bias voltage 440 V that is 60 V higher than arc inception voltage for the

string with coverglass overhang. Arc sites are located between adjacent cells belonging as to middle string as to neighboring strings. Two other strings demonstrate much lower arc inception voltages due to arcing on edges. Unfortunately, experimental setup has not provided a possibility to heat this sample above room temperature but even the results obtained to date show that this kind of solar array can be used in LEO to generate power at voltage 450 V if array edges are electrically insulated.

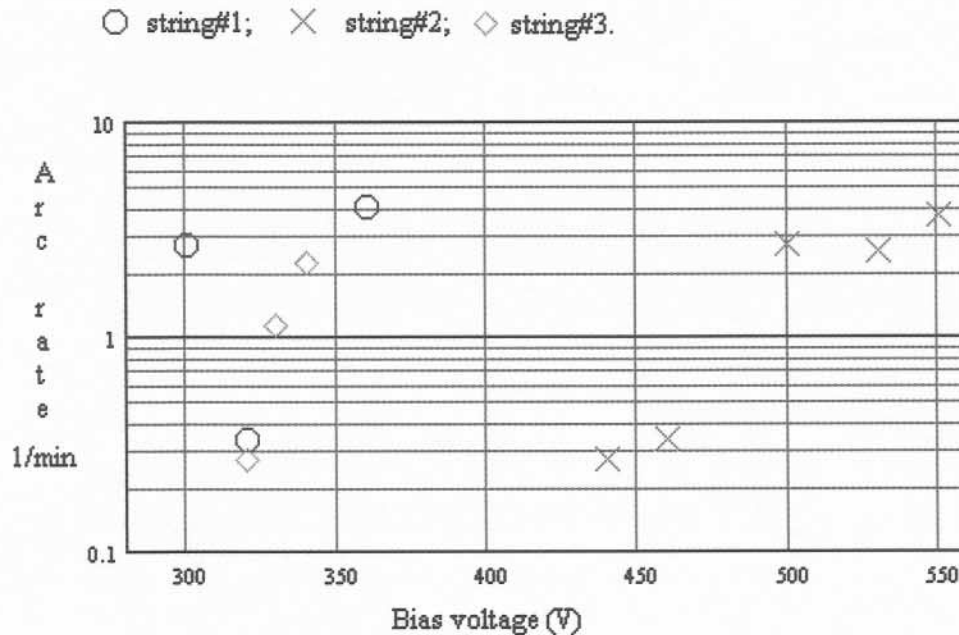


Fig.12. Arc rate on sample #5.

Short electrostatic discharges studied above are certainly undesirable events that must be prevented for reliable operation of the spacecraft. However, this kind of transients are not damaging solar array irreversibly, at least in cases of low additional capacitances used in current experiments. Sustained discharges initiated between adjacent cells with a few tens volt potential difference are much more dangerous [12,13] because they can destroy cells and underlying substrate that results in considerable loss of power. Samples #1, #2, and #4 have been tested against an inception of sustained arc between two strings. The circuitry diagram for the test is shown in Fig.1. Test starts with lower limits on SAS voltage and current. After the registration of 5-10 arcs these parameters are gradually changed and more arcs are generated until initial sign of sustained discharge is seen on the oscilloscope. This sign represents the SAS current pulse that continues much longer than original arc. The corresponding SAS voltage and current are considered as threshold parameters because even a small increase of them (10 V and 0.25 A) results in spectacular event shown in Fig. 13. In this case the sustained discharge has been quenched after 20 s by turning SAS off. Damaged part of the sample is shown in Fig.14. Threshold parameters depend on solar array design: they are 40 V and 1 A for sample #1, 60 V and 2 A for sample #2, and 80V and 1.6 A for sample #4.



Fig.13. Sustained arc between adjacent strings on sample #2.

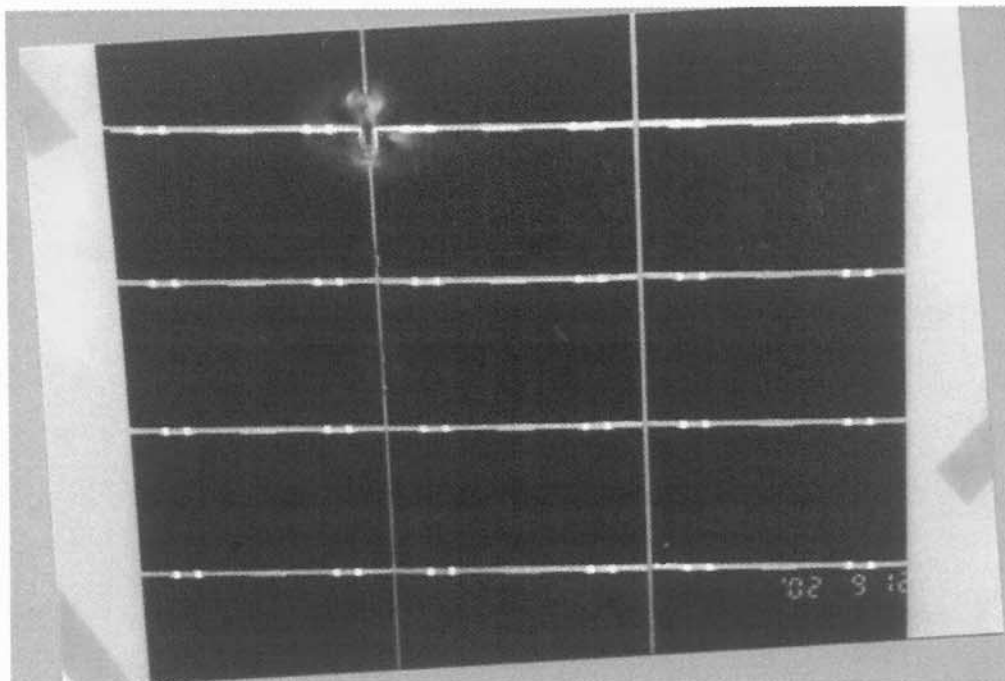


Fig.14. Damage induced by sustained arc.

6. Scaling of arc parameters

Even short transients are detrimental for spacecraft, and the degree of damage increases with the increase of arc current amplitude and pulse width. These two parameters depend on the amount of electrical charge leaking into surrounding plasma during the discharge time. There are currently two theoretical models that allow estimating lost electrical charge and its dependence on the array capacitance. First model⁷ is based on the suggestion that the discharge generates an expanding plasma sheath neutralizing positive charge on top of coverglass. If plasma expands with a constant speed the discharge time is proportional to the array linear dimensions, or, in another terms, to the square root of an array capacitance. This dependence has been proved in many experiments [14,15]. However, the distance that plasma can expand on is limited to about 1 m in simulated LEO conditions [16]. Thus, according to the first model the upper limit for the effective capacitance is the capacitance of the part of solar array with area approximately 1 m². The second model also envisages that both arc current amplitude and pulse width are proportional to the square root of a capacitance but this prediction is based on the dynamics of ionization-recombination processes in the discharge plasma [6]. If the second model is correct the effective capacitance is only two-three times less than the capacitance of a whole solar array. A simple experiment has been performed to verify the validity of the second model¹². Two solar array samples (sample #2) are mounted on aluminum panel with grounded aluminum plate installed between samples. The height of the plate is 7.5 cm bigger than the distance between aluminum panel and top of the sample. Such arrangement prevents the expansion of plasma sheath from one sample to another. The additional capacitor of 1000 pF is used in this particular experiment.

The capacitance of one cell can be calculated as

$$C_1 = \frac{\epsilon_0 \epsilon_1 S_1}{d_1} \left(1 + \frac{\epsilon_1 d_2}{\epsilon_2 d_1} \right)^{-1} \quad (1)$$

where $\epsilon_{1,2}$ are dielectric constants of coverglass and adhesive, $d_{1,2}$ are their thicknesses, and S_1 is a cell area.

Dielectric constants are: for borosilicate coverglass $\epsilon_1=6.7$, and for epoxy $\epsilon_2=3.6$. Thus, a quite reliable estimate can be obtained: $C_1=590$ pF/cell. Moreover, the scaling does not practically depend on exact numbers for largest capacitances. Ten measurements of arc current pulse widths for each configuration have been done by biasing one string, three strings, and six strings in parallel. The results are shown in Fig.15. The scaling is confirmed with a very high accuracy, which means that adequate ground simulations of arcing on spacecraft surfaces have to be performed with a very large additional capacitance (for instance, about 1000 μ F for ISS).

7. Conclusions

Comprehensive tests of five different types of solar array samples in simulated LEO plasma environment have demonstrated that the highest arc threshold (440 V) can be achieved for an array with wrapthrough interconnects if edges of strings are not exposed to the plasma. This design is also effective in decreasing of an array current collection. The design with exposed interconnects but with coverglass overhang also provides significant improvement comparatively to the conventional design. Particularly, arcing on the sample cannot be initiated at potentials below 300 V even under room temperature, and arc threshold increases to 420 V under temperature 72 C. The increase of coverglass thickness also results in some improving of array parameters. Thorough outgassing of solar array surfaces may result in significant decrease of arc rate for a conventionally designed solar array.

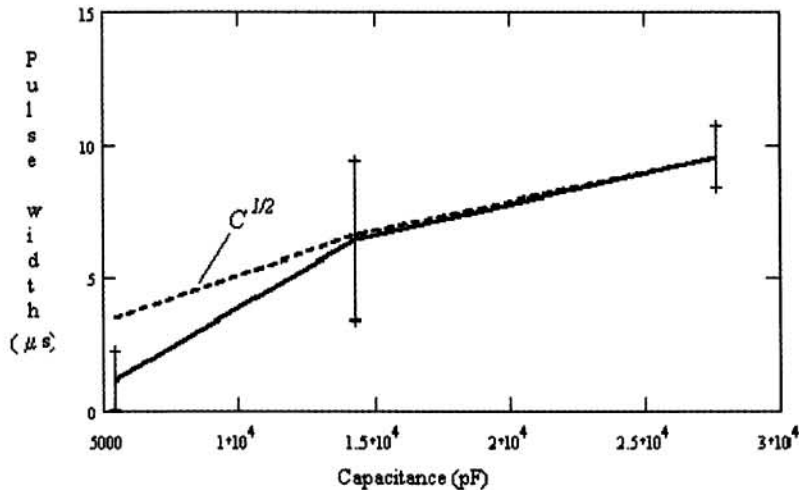


Fig.15. Pulse width scaling measured by biasing to -340 V one, three, and six strings of sample #2. Error bars ($\pm 1\sigma$) are calculated from ten measurements for each point.

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